# Did Bellarmine Condemn Sedevacantism?

Rev. Anthony Cekada

In debates among traditional Catholics regarding the legitimacy of the post-Conciliar popes, the following quote from St. Robert Bellarmine has been repeatedly recycled:

Just as it is licit to resist the Pontiff who attacks the body, so also is it licit to resist him who attacks souls or destroys the civil order or above all, tries to destroy the Church. I say that it is licit to resist him by not doing what he orders and by impeding the execution of his will. It is not licit, however, to judge him, to punish him, or to depose him, for these are acts proper to a superior. (*De Romano Pontifice*. II.29.)

Some use this quote, taken from Bellarmine's lengthy treatise defending the power of the pope, to condemn "sedevacantism" — the thesis which maintains that the post-Conciliar hierarchy, including the post-Conciliar popes, lost their office *ipso facto* through heresy. I have seen it employed this way no less that three times in the past four months — once in *The Remnant* (Edwin Faust, "Signa Temporum," 15 April 1994, 8), once in *The Catholic* (Michael Farrell, Letter to Editor, "Simple Answer to the Sede-Vacantists," April 1994, 10), and once by a Society of St. Pius X priest.

Traditional Catholics who reject the New Mass and the post-Vatican II changes but still maintain that the post-Conciliar popes legitimately hold office — a group which includes the Society, Michael Davies, and many others — also see in this passage some sort of justification for recognizing someone as pope but rejecting his commands.

The quote has been cited over and over to support these positions, in complete good faith, no doubt. Alas, it has been taken out of context and completely misapplied. In its original context, Bellarmine's statement neither condemns the principle behind the sedevacantist position, nor justifies resisting laws promulgated by a validly-elected pope.

What is more, in the chapter immediately following the statement quoted, Bellarmine defends the thesis that a heretical pope automatically loses his office.

In passing, we should first note how it is a stupid calumny to cite this passage and to suggest that sedevacantists "judge," "punish," or "depose" the pope. They do no such thing. They merely apply to the words and acts of post-Conciliar popes a principle enunciated by many great canonists and theologians, including (as we shall see) St. Robert Bellarmine: a heretical pope "deposes" himself.

I. The meaning of the passage has been distorted by taking it out of its proper context.

The passage cited is from a lengthy chapter Bellarmine devotes to refuting nine arguments advocating the position that the pope is subject to secular power (emperor, king, etc.) and an ecumenical council (the heresy of conciliarism).

The general context, therefore, is a discussion of the power of the state vis-à-vis the pope. Obviously, this has nothing whatsoever to do with issues the sedevacantists have raised.

In its particular context, the oft-cited quote is part of Bellarmine's refutation of the following argument:

*Argument 7.* Any person is permitted to kill the pope if he is unjustly attacked by him. Therefore, even more so is it permitted for kings or a council to depose the pope if he disturbs the state, or if he tries to kill souls by his bad example.

Bellarmine answers:

I respond by denying the second part of the argument. For to resist an attacker and defend one's self, no authority is needed, nor is it necessary that he who is attacked be the judge and superior of him who attacks. Authority is required, however, to judge and punish.

It is only then that Bellarmine states:

Just as it is licit to resist the Pontiff who attacks the body, so also is it licit to resist him who attacks souls or destroys the civil order or above all, tries to destroy the Church. I say that it is licit to resist him by not doing what he orders and by impeding the execution of his will. It is not licit, however, to judge him, to punish him, or to depose him, for these are acts proper to a superior. (*De Romano Pontifice*. II.29.)

The quote, then, is *not* a condemnation of "sedevacantism." Bellarmine, rather, is discussing the course of action which may legitimately be taken against a pope who upsets the political order or "kills souls by his bad

example." A king or a council may not *depose* such a pope, Bellarmine argues, because they are not his superior — but they may *resist* him.

Nor does this quote support those traditional Catholics who would recognize John Paul II as pope but reject his Mass and ignore his laws.

First, the passage justifies resistance by *kings* and *councils*. It does *not* say that individual bishops, priests and laymen on their own possess this right to resist the pope and ignore his commands — still less that they can set up places of worship in opposition to diocesan bishops a pope has lawfully appointed.

Second, note the precise *causes* for resistance in the case Bellarmine is discussing: disturbing the state or giving bad example. These, obviously, are not the same thing as papal liturgical legislation, disciplinary laws or doctrinal pronouncements which an individual might somehow deem harmful. Bellarmine would hardly approve of disregarding, *carte blanche*, for 30 years the directives of men one claims to recognize as legitimate occupants of the papal office and the vicars of Christ on earth.

In sum, the passage neither condemns sedevacantism nor supports traditionalists like the adherents of the Society of St. Pius X.

# II. Bellarmine teaches that a heretical pope automatically loses his office.

In the chapter which immediately follows the passage cited, St. Robert Bellarmine treats the following question: "Whether a heretical pope can be deposed." Note first, by the way, that his question assumes a pope *can* in fact become a heretic.

After a lengthy discussion of various opinions theologians have given on this issue, Bellarmine says:

The fifth opinion therefore is the true one. A pope who is a manifest heretic automatically (*per se*) ceases to be pope and head, just as he ceases automatically to be a Christian and a member of the Church. Wherefore, he can be judged and punished by the Church. *This is the teaching of all the ancient Fathers* who teach that manifest heretics immediately lose all jurisdiction. (*De Romano Pontifice*. II.30. My emphasis)

Bellarmine then cites passages from Cyprian, Driedonus and Melchior Cano in support of his position. The basis for this teaching, he says finally, is that a manifest heretic is *in no way* a member of the Church — neither of its soul nor its body, neither by an internal union nor an external one.

Thus the writings of Bellarmine, far from condemning the sedevacantist position, provide the central principle upon which it is based — that a pope who becomes a manifest heretic automatically loses his office and jurisdiction.

Nor is Bellarmine's teaching an isolated opinion. It is the teaching of all the ancient Fathers, he assures us. And the principle he enunciated has been reiterated by theologians and canonists right into the 20th century, including commentators on the 1983 Code of Canon Law promulgated by John Paul II himself.

* * * * *

Those who would recognize John Paul II as pope while disregarding all his commands, therefore, can take no consolation whatsoever in the passage from Bellarmine.

It is the sedevacantist position, rather, that is supported by the teaching of the great Robert Bellarmine: a legitimate pope must be obeyed; a heretical pope loses his office.

(*Sacerdotium* 12, Summer 1994).